



## Analysis of Sunni-Based Opposition in Iraq

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### **Introduction: Using Social Movement Theory to Understand the Current Challenges and Opportunities for the New Iraqi Government**

The Coalition characterization of the opposition in Iraq has evolved slowly over the life of the conflict. Originally, U.S. senior leaders and military officials identified the opposition as dead-enders or foreign terrorists. As the outline of the opposition became somewhat clearer, this characterization began to change. To day, the opposition is generalized into three groups: Sunni, Shi'a militias in the form of the Sadr II movement, and foreign terrorists. While this generalization is not perfect, it is the characterization that I will use to examine Iraqi opposition to U.S. forces, specifically focusing on the creation and growth of forces in Sunni areas opposing the Coalition in Iraq. Using social movement theory<sup>[1]</sup> as a framework for analysis, I will examine opposition groups in the context of political opportunity, organization, and the framing used to mobilize support. Analysis of the opposition will focus on the Sunni-based insurgents, examining their growth since the fall of Saddam Hussein, as well as draw conclusions on current trends the new Iraqi government, Iraqi Security forces, and Coalition forces are capitalizing upon to weaken the Sunni-based opposition.

### **Sunni Opposition Groups**

To identify Iraqi indigenous groups as essentially Sunni is a gross mischaracterization. A better description would be either opposition groups operating in traditionally Sunni areas, or groups representing Iraqis who are no longer in power. The challenge in defining these groups is the complexity of the society and the mix of tribal, religious, and Ba'athist impact on the Iraqi population.

After the close of major combat operations in 2003, the United States and the Interim Iraqi government regarded Iraqi insurgents primarily as disaffected former Ba'athists. Jim Kuvalcaba, a Tufts military scholar, offers a more generalized characterization of the former regime elements as "Preservationists [who] employ asymmetric means to attack selected targets to discredit the government and cause disenfranchisement among the population."<sup>[2]</sup> Indeed, a list of most wanted in Iraq, released in February 2005, is largely made up of former regime officials, indicating that authority figures view many Ba'athist groups as problematic at best.

It is clear, however, that Ba'athist groups comprised of former regime officials do not constitute the full extent of Sunni-based opposition to US presence in Iraq and the emerging Iraqi government. Other groups that are ideologically closer to Zarqawi and Al-Qaeda are also involved, such as Ansar al-Sunah. Such groups have actively opposed US and interim Iraqi government actions in Iraq, through direct violence against US and Iraqi government personnel and leading a boycott of the January 2005 national Iraqi elections.

Unfortunately, complexities of Iraqi society, such as overlapping social and power networks, confound a straightforward analysis of Iraqi opposition groups. Specifically, Sunni-based opposition groups in Iraq are not easily distinguished, and information on specific group composition is scarce. As a result, I approach analysis of these various groups at a macro, aggregate level, using the rubric of social movement theory to inform the analysis. I contend that the anti-Coalition movement that has emerged within the predominantly Sunni territories offers a particularly illustrative case study, especially when considering uncontested political space, the resulting impact on the growth of the opposition within Iraq, and the emergence of multiple sovereignties<sup>[3]</sup> in areas by-passed by the Coalition during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. This paper offers key highlights from the case study in the hopes of enhancing our understanding of the insurgency.

## Political Opportunity for Sunni-based Groups

Political opportunity available to the Sunni-based opposition after the fall of the Hussein regime, came in three forms:

1. an imperfect end to the conflict;
2. insurgent information advantage; and
3. decreasing Coalition presence in Sunni areas.

The war in Iraq ended with a whimper. Military historian John Keegan describes the phenomenon of an Iraqi Army that in some areas of the country disappeared.<sup>[4]</sup> The conflict did not end with an unconditional surrender by political or military leaders. The leadership evaporated, leaving the Coalition to declare victory by unseating without permanently removing the previous regime. There was little for the Coalition to do to solve this problem. Saddam Hussein, his sons, and the other leaders of Iraq ran from the Coalition, choosing to hide. During this period, Saddam Hussein focused on survival; seeking to evade capture by Coalition forces. As Saddam Hussein hid, others within the former regime seized this chaotic period as an opportunity to mobilize. In short, while the United States focused on eliminating the last vestiges of Hussein's regime during the early months of occupation, emerging Sunni leaders seized upon this lack of effective governance to organize and mobilize their constituencies. Thus, the imperfect end to the conflict created an opportunity for Sunni-based anti-Coalition groups to become effective agitators in the weeks following cessation of major hostilities.

Moreover, while the opposition was mobilizing in the underground, the United States' immediate focus following the conflict was on reducing troop strength and finding anticipated weapons of mass destruction. As violence against the Coalition increased, senior leaders placed the blame on dead-enders and foreign terrorists. Inadvertently, a gathering storm was developing in terms of a distinct information advantage for a growing opposition. Bruce Hoffman, a RAND counterinsurgency expert, notes that this interpretative lens is common for occupying forces:

The fact that military planners apparently didn't consider the possibility that sustained and organized resistance could gather momentum and transform itself into an insurgency reflects a pathology that has long afflicted governments and militaries everywhere: the failure not only to recognize the incipient conditions for insurgency, but also to ignore its nascent manifestations and arrest its growth before it is able to gain initial traction and in turn momentum.<sup>[5]</sup>

In Iraq, this failure to grasp marks of a rising insurgency translated to a severe information deficit for the Coalition, as insufficient intelligence resources were applied to collecting and analyzing its emergence. The Jones Report specifically identified the intelligence shortfalls facing the Coalition in the period immediately following the fall of the Hussein regime:

As commanders at all levels sought operational intelligence, it became apparent that the intelligence structure was undermanned, under-equipped, and inappropriately organized for counter-insurgency operations. Upon arrival in July 2003, MG Barbara Fast was tasked to do an initial assessment of the intelligence architecture needed to execute the CJTF-7 mission in Iraq. Technical intelligence collection means alone were insufficient in providing the requisite information on an enemy that had adapted to the environment and to a high-tech opponent. Only through an aggressive structure of human intelligence (HUMINT) collection and analysis could the requisite information be obtained. Communications equipment, computers, and access to sufficient bandwidth to allow reachback capabilities to national databases were needed to assist in the fusion and collaboration of tactical through strategic intelligence data. Disparate cells of different agencies had to be co-located to allow access to respective data bases to assist in the fusion and collaboration effort.[6]

Military leadership responded quickly to this problem once recognized, but the information advantage ceded to the opposition during the May-August 2003 timeframe gave the opposition opportunity to organize.

Further, the opposition created additional opportunity through the use of violence. As violence against Coalition forces increased, areas within the country became Coalition “no-go zones.”[7] These no-go zones included Samara, Ramadi, and most famously, Fallujah. As Coalition forces drew back from these areas, the contest for the support of the population dramatically shifted to the opposition. According to Bruce Hoffman, “It is a truism of counterinsurgency that a population will give its allegiance to the side that will best protect it.”[8] These uncontested spaces enabled the opposition to dominate both the physical and information space, in effect avoiding the underground. Traditionally, an insurgency is a contest for the population. During extended periods in 2004, the opposition was able to win the contest unopposed. The vacuum created in these areas gave the opposition freedom of movement and safe haven, enabling mobilization above ground.

## Opposition Mobilizing Structures

Primary mobilization structures for the opposition in Sunni-based areas included previous regime actions, Coalition policies, and an unchallenged information space. In a perverse sense, the discriminatory and manipulative policies of the Hussein regime provided ready social networks alienated from the emerging power structure in Iraq. Throughout his reign Saddam Hussein retained an iron grip on Iraq through the skillful manipulation of the diversity and makeup of the Iraqi population. This manipulation resulted in creating layers of trust within the government through nepotism, tribal ties, and careful vetting of loyalty.[9] Saddam Hussein selected those closest to him by relying on family, tribal, and Ba’ath Party affiliations. This close knit group largely made up the “deck of cards” wanted by the Coalition. After the fall of Baghdad, this group dispersed and was hunted by the Coalition. The former regime leadership was forced into the underworld, likely relying on the same trusted network of family and tribal connections for support. This designed hierarchy of “haves” in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, became outsiders which forced this former hierarchy to band together or lose all of its previous influence.

As Saddam Hussein went into hiding, the Coalition formulated its strategy for post-conflict governance. It is trite at this point to label the Coalition Provisional Authority policies of de-Ba’athification and disbanding of the Iraqi Army as a cause of the insurgency.[10] Although these policies likely contributed recruits as foot soldiers, it is a certainty that the current suspected

leaders of the Sunni groups would have been unwelcome in any future Iraqi society. Whereas former Ba'athist leaders would be unwelcome, a role for the remnants of the Iraqi Army is less clear. Disbanding of the Iraqi Army likely impacted the growth of the insurgency in two potential ways:

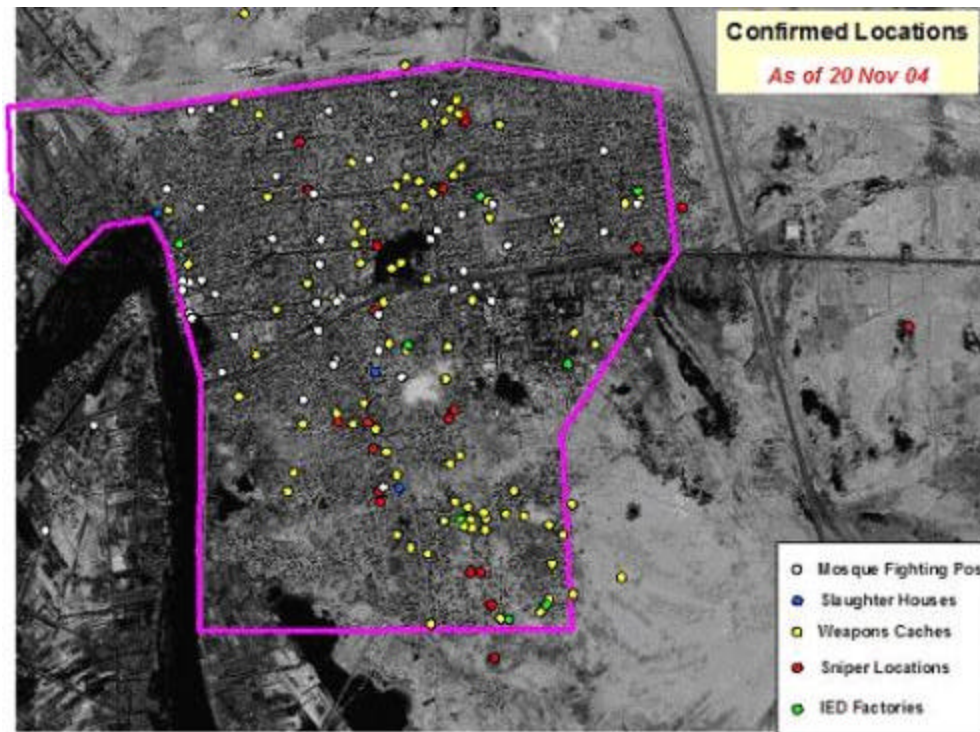
1. Increased the number of unemployed in a country with no industry; and
2. Limited the potential reuse of Army soldiers in other capacities supporting the Coalition.

Despite the fact that large segments of the Iraqi Army did dissolve in the face of the Coalition invasion, some Coalition units, such as the 101 st Airborne Division, were moderately successful in recruiting former soldiers in the area around Mosul.<sup>[11]</sup> This practice ended with the CPA order #2, which officially disbanded the former Iraqi Army.

While the connection between these policies and the growth of the insurgency cannot be empirically linked, the lack of opportunity for unemployed Iraqis has created a market for anti-Coalition activities. The 4th Infantry Division Commander, MG Raymond Odierno, reported that payment for attacks on Coalition was increasing, "When we first got here (October 2003), we believed it was about \$100 to conduct an attack against coalition forces, and \$500 if you're successful. We now (March 2004) believe it's somewhere between \$1000 and \$2000 if you conduct an attack, and \$3000 to \$5000 if you're successful."<sup>[12]</sup> This developing market has enabled the opposition groups to mobilize actions against the Coalition leveraging funds rather than recruits. It is important to note, however, that the rising costs potentially indicate that security measures and the establishment of the interim Iraqi government are resulting in an improved security posture within Iraq.

Another mobilization opportunity for the opposition emerged in unchallenged information spaces. As discussed previously, the Coalition inadvertently provided political opportunity to the Sunni-based insurgent groups in areas that became no-go zones for the Coalition. In the aftermath of the U.S.-led re-capturing of Fallujah, the totality of insurgent control of the city and associated information space became apparent. This enabled the creation of an insurgent infrastructure within the city. The figure below ([Figure 1](#)) is an extract from an after-action report on the insurgent presence at the time of the U.S operation to reclaim Fallujah.

**Figure 1:**



#### Opposition controlled positions in Fallujah prior to U.S. action, November 2004[13]

Though lacking direct evidence to determine which facilities were used to mobilize in terms of recruitment, it is clear that mosques (60 of 100 in Fallujah)[14] were used as a point for conducting violent actions against the U.S.-led Coalition, the interim Iraqi government, and the Iraqi population. The level of control as shown in [Figure 1](#) and the resulting impact of such a density of movement sites are described in research by Charles Tilly. In his research on the importance of space and place in mobilizing collective action, he states:

High proximity fixed connections generate substantial local knowledge as well as extensive interplay between contentious repertoires and routine noncontentious social interaction.[15]

In this case, Fallujah is the extreme example of groups' total domination of the physical and information space. There has been no battle of ideas between the group and the government. Thus, in certain areas of Iraq, the Sunni-based opposition groups have become the *de facto* government.

In contrast to the case of Fallujah, other areas in the country, such as Mosul, were secured by Coalition forces since the fall of the Hussein regime. Areas, such as Mosul, have had much lower rates of violent attacks and as of early April 2005 Iraqi security forces prepared to assume primacy in providing security in the city.[16] Reasons attributed to this drastically improved situation in Mosul, include:

The military attributes the decline to several factors, including Iraqis' increased willingness to provide information about insurgents and the growing presence of the new Iraqi security forces throughout the country. But the main reason, military officials said, is a grinding counterinsurgency operation—now in its 20th month...It is a campaign of endless repetition: platoons of American troops patrolling Iraqi streets on foot or in armored vehicles. Its inherent monotony is punctuated by moments of extreme violence.[17]

In contrast to the “no-go zone” of Fallujah, Mosul was space contested by the Coalition since April 2003. The tireless efforts of the units stationed there has resulted in increased trust, effectively countering opposition actions in that city.

## Frames and Repertoires of Action

Sunni-based opposition groups also leveraged framing processes and violent repertoires of action. Given the disparate nature of the groups involved in the Sunni-based insurgency, their frames and framing processes are not uniform and no clear cut ideology exists. What do exist are common frames, consisting of anti-Coalition, anti-Iraqi government, and anti-collaboration messages and actions.

The master frame of the opposition forces has been anti-Coalition. All other frames and actions amplify the anti-Coalition frame, where blame is laid on the Coalition for the change in status of the Sunni areas. Iraq is replete with examples of anti-Coalition framing, such as this statement from the Islamic Army of Iraq:

When the infidel Americans and their allies became weak and the burden [of Iraq] became unbearable, they decided to rescue their remaining dignity by using so-called democracy in order to rule over us using our own people. It is well-known that the meaning of democracy is ‘rule of the people’, but their decisions are not true to this infidel concept. Moreover, they impose whatever they like in the name of democracy, this democracy that gives cover to occupation and tyranny.[\[18\]](#)

Likewise other groups echo the anti-Coalition refrain. Ansar al-Sunnah provides another example of the anti-coalition framing that has occurred within the Sunni opposition forces. Having announced its formation in September 2003 as a mixture of foreign jihadists, former members of Ansar al-Islam (the Northern Iraq, Kurdish based group that harbored Zarqawi), and Iraqi Sunnis, the group announced that it was “A detachment of mujahadeen, ulema, and political and military experts, who are seasoned in Islamic conflict against atheists.”[\[19\]](#) Ansar al-Sunnah produces a bridging of anti-Coalition messages with justification for these actions through a duty of jihad. Regardless of the group, each has used violence to reinforce their words.

Anti-coalition framing has been supported with indiscriminate violence against Coalition forces within Iraq. The sheer number of anti-Coalition attacks has been staggering. Since April 2004, there have been more than 1500 attacks on Coalition forces per month. Although these attacks were not exclusively Sunni-based, these groups are credited with over 90% of the attacks.[\[20\]](#) Sunni-based groups have also used specific, targeted attacks against Coalition members to attempt to fracture the Coalition. Attacks on Coalition intelligence services and kidnappings serve as examples of this class of attack.

Attacks on Coalition intelligence services represent the sophistication and tactical abilities of the opposition. In separate attacks, Ansar al-Sunnah claimed responsibility for the ambush and killing of Coalition intelligence forces. The first in January 2004 killed eight Canadian and British “intelligence men.”[\[21\]](#) Ansar al-Sunnah produced a videotape of the attack. While the Coalition has not acknowledged this attack, or the identities of the victims, the potential systematic targeting of the Coalition intelligence apparatus represents a next step in opposition tactics. In a separate attack in November 2004, seven Spanish intelligence officers were killed in an ambush near Baghdad.[\[22\]](#)

Taking a page from the Zarqawi playbook, Sunni-based groups have also used kidnappings as a repertoire of violent action. These kidnappings have targeted foreign contractors, media, non-governmental organizations, as well as Iraqi and Kurdish leaders. Foreign countries targeted have included: South Korea, Nepal, Italy, France, Russia, China, Lebanon, Italy, Philippines,

Pakistan, Egypt, Bulgaria, Britain, and of course, the United States. In some of the cases those kidnapped have been executed; in others, the country has negotiated a release. Groups that have claimed responsibility for kidnappings include: Ansar al-Sunnah, Islamic Anger Brigades, and the Assadullah Brigades.[23] These groups have not limited their attacks to the Coalition.

The Sunni-based groups extended their venom to include the Iraqi government, principally the nascent Iraqi security forces. As Iraqi Security forces have grown, the Iraqi opposition has systematically targeted these emerging forces. The most gruesome of these attacks occurred in late October 2004, when 49 new Iraqi Army recruits were murdered after departing an Iraqi training base on leave. The attack and its impact were immediately felt within the Coalition and the Iraqi government. Iraqi Prime Minister Allawi responded by saying, "I think there was major negligence by the multinational forces. It was a way to damage Iraq and the Iraqi people." [24] While this attack was among the most gruesome, it was not an isolated incident. Iraqi security forces have also been kidnapped and reports of infiltration of the Iraqi Army by the insurgents have also been widely reported.[25]

Perhaps the most successful tactic to implement anti-coalition and anti-government frames has been suicide bombings. These groups have leveraged suicide bombings as a critical repertoire of action against the Coalition and the Iraqi population. Suicide bombings have produced extremely devastating attacks. This terror tactic has become more prevalent in Iraq, peaking at 133 in November 2004.[26] Major General John DeFreitas III, Multi-National Forces-Iraq Director of Intelligence, underscores the impact of these attacks, "We see the suicide car bomb as the insurgents' precision guided weapon. No other weapon is so efficient at terrorizing and intimidating the population." [27] Iraqi security force recruits have been particularly vulnerable to this class of attack. A suicide attacker, posing as another recruit, walks into a crowd in front of a recruiting station and detonates his explosives; killing or maiming the gathered crowd.[28]

Whereas targeting of Iraqi security forces has been significant, the opposition's attacks on the Iraqi economy may have the longest term effect. Sunni-based groups have been very successful in the targeting of the Iraqi economy, besieging the oil industry with acts of sabotage. The U.S. Director of Reconstruction for the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, David Taylor, said in November 2004, "The minister of oil is very concerned about...the security of people repairing oil lines and intimidating truck drivers." [29] The results of these attacks speak for themselves. A recent report by the Brookings Institute shows that Iraqi oil revenues have declined to \$1.34B in February 2005 from a high of \$1.99B in October 2004.[30] In addition to these direct attacks on the Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi economy, the other primary opposition frame extends to Iraqi citizens considering employment or support to the Iraqi government.

The anti-collaboration frame has directly targeted the Iraqi populace, branding supporters of the government or employees of the government as "collaborators." Anyone working with the Coalition is potentially targeted. One example is Iraqi translators working for the Coalition, by late October 2004, some 45 assisting the U.S. military had been killed in Baghdad alone.[31]

Sunni-based groups have created a very effective anti-collaboration frame. Supported closely with repertoires of violence, this frame has resonated within the Iraqi population. Immediately following the U.S.-led liberation of Fallujah, Lt Gen Lance Smith, Deputy Commander of U.S. Central Command said, "I will tell you that the intimidation campaign that is ongoing is very effective and we see it permeates many levels of the Iraqi government and the Iraqi security forces.[32]" The opposition has translated these negative frames into violent actions or repertoires against the Coalition, the interim Iraqi government, and the Iraqi population.

To reinforce this anti-collaboration frame, the opposition also successfully used psychological operations as part of their operations, distributing leaflets in areas of the country that may come under attack. Examples of this occurred post-Fallujah (November 2004) when insurgents stepped up attacks in Baghdad. Prior to the operations, leaflets were distributed in Baghdad

neighborhoods urging government workers to stay home to “avoid putting their lives in danger.”[33]

In another anti-collaboration repertoire, *Newsweek* has reported that in neighborhoods across Baghdad (February 2005), “renunciation centers”[34] have been established. At these locations, Iraqis accused of cooperating with the Coalition can avoid death by publicly announcing their opposition to the Coalition. In some cases these renunciations are done in person, in other cases the renunciation must be accomplished in writing.

## Conclusion

What has emerged in Iraq is an unlikely, unholy alliance of disparate groups and individuals that have coalesced into an anti-Coalition, anti-Iraqi government movement. According to Bruce Hoffman, RAND Corporation’s Director for Middle East Public Policy and a senior fellow at the U.S. Military Academy’s Combating Terrorism Center, the current state of opposition in Iraq is as follows:

The Iraqi insurgency has no center of gravity. Secular Ba’athists and other (Former Regime Elements) are cooperating with domestic and foreign religious extremists...The Iraqi insurgency today appears to have no clear leader (or leadership), no ambition to seize and actually hold territory, no unifying ideology, and most importantly, no identifiable organization.[35]

This movement continued to mobilize support throughout 2004. While the success of the Iraqi elections within Shi’a areas provides optimism, potential exists that the lack of Sunni participation will increase the oppositional consciousness within Sunni areas. The challenge for the emerging Iraqi government will be to somehow expand the inclusiveness of the new government to include the disenfranchised populous within these areas, while also mitigating the influence of foreign elements and former Ba’athist leaders.

Throughout the post-conflict period, the Iraqi population’s views of the Coalition have also deteriorated. [Table 1](#) shows the results of polls conducted by the Coalition Provisional Authority in January and May 2004.

**Table 1:**

How much confidence do you have in the Coalition to improve the situation in Iraq?		
	January 2004	May 2004
Great Deal	11.6%	1.5%
Fair Amount	16.7%	8.2%
Not Very Much	13.7%	6.1%
None at All	53.3%	80.6%
Iraqi population’s view of the Coalition [36]		

Similarly, an International Republican Institute poll completed in October 2004 asked Iraqis, “Thinking about the difficult situation in Iraq currently, whether in terms of security, the economy, or living conditions, who in your view is most to blame?”[37] A full third (33.4%) blamed the multinational forces, 32% foreign terrorists, 8% the armed supporters of the former regime, and 12%, a combination of the three. Though certainly not conclusive, the opposition’s attempts to blame the Coalition appear to be resonating with the population. Although these numbers are not encouraging, the situation is not completely dire. Understanding and defusing the opposition’s

mobilization structures and countering the oppositional frames can weaken this amorphous anti-Coalition, anti-Iraqi opposition.

## Implications for Policy

The Iraqi elections created enormous opportunities for the new Iraqi government to weaken support for the Sunni-based opposition. While the low voter turnout within Sunni areas is a large concern, the recent steps taken by the new government to include Sunni leaders is a positive step for legitimacy in the eyes of the Sunni population. Also, the initial announcements made by new Iraqi leaders signal intent to weaken the mobilization structures and frames of the opposition.

To date, the frames used by the Sunni-based opposition have been anti-Coalition and anti-collaboration, the opposition has not offered a positive agenda or a vision for Iraq. In contrast, the new Iraqi government has established a desire for inclusion and reinforcement of an Iraqi nationalism frame. This counterframing<sup>[38]</sup> potentially allows the new government to weaken the opposition by offering Iraqi nationalism and a vision for a new Iraq as an effective positive counter to the negative agenda of the opposition.

In his first remarks about the opposition, Iraq's new President, Jalal Tabani, discussed the potential of a broad amnesty program. Tabani distinguished foreign elements (such as Zarqawi) and Iraqi opposition, "It is essential that we separate those who came from outside the country, like all those organizations affiliated with al Qaeda, from Iraqis. We must seek to win over the Iraqis to the democratic process going on in the country."<sup>[39]</sup> The attempts at inclusion will be challenging, but if teamed successfully with an increased effort to promote Iraqi nationalism; the opposition may be forced deeper into the underground.

To promote nationalism and attack the oppositions use of terror tactics, one outlet chosen by the Iraqi government is a novel one: reality TV. The new show "Terrorism in the Hands of Justice" has created a large following on the Iraqi state-owned television network. During each show, captured opposition confess to attacks on the Iraqi people. The show is controversial due to the potential for coerced confessions, yet the effort by the Iraqi government to label the opposition as mercenaries and anti-Iraqi does draw a response. One Baghdad resident responded to the show, "For the first time, we saw those who claim to be jihadists as simple \$50 murders who would do everything in the name of Islam. Our religion is too lofty, noble, and humane to have such thugs and killers."<sup>[40]</sup> This is certainly not the entire answer, but these anecdotes show intent by the emerging Iraqi government to counter the opposition's message and mobilization structures.

The new Iraqi government's efforts to create a renewed sense of Iraqi nationalism will be difficult, but there are signs that opportunity exists for the new government. In the same polls that showed a declining trust in Coalition forces, the Iraqi people have demonstrated exceedingly high confidence in their new Iraqi Army and police forces. In both cases, 74% of Iraqis surveyed stated that they had either a great deal or quite a lot of trust for these new Iraqi security organizations.<sup>[41]</sup> If the government can successfully include increasing numbers of the Sunni minority, this will potentially drive the opposition further into the underground. These actions combined with previous Coalition and Iraqi security force actions to limit safe havens for the opposition limits the opposition's space to mobilize. The deeper into the underground the opposition descends, the new government can contest both the physical and information space throughout the country.

## Summary

Social movement theory provides an excellent framework for evaluating the Sunni-based opposition in Iraq. Viewed through the SMT lens, an analysis of the oppositions' opportunity, mobilization structures, framing processes, and repertoires of action produces a different vantage

point for analysis; one that sheds additional light on a complex, fluid situation. The enhanced understanding of the oppositions' mobilization structures and frames manifests an opportunity to develop a strategy to counter the oppositions' agenda; or at a minimum, not reinforce it.

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